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Comer, Gower, Investigator

October 16, 1937

Interview with William Nail,

Ex-slave, Poteau, Oklahoma.

## Medicine Men

The above named ex-slave, William Nail, states that the custom of the early immigrant Choctaw Indians, when treating stricken members of their tribe, as related to him by several of his friends among the Indians was as follows:

When a member of the family fell sick the Tribal Medicine Man was sent for. Upon his arrival at the home preparation for the treatment of the sick inmate would begin. The first step in that preparation would be to cut two slender sycamore poles about eight feet in length. These would be securely fixed in the ground at the same distance apart as the width of the door and at a distance of the length of the poles--eight feet--from the door and exactly in line with the entrance to the home. Then some tail or wing feathers of either a wild turkey, a hawk or an owl, would be provided and three of the feathers would be tied to the poles, near their top, with red ribbons when available. When red ribbon was not available, then some other material dyed with pokeberries would be used. However, much more curative properties were reputed to lie in

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the use of red ribbons. When the two poles, suitably ornamented with the tail feathers of some wild fowl and tied with red material, were set up in the manner described, all the inmates of the house except the sick person and the medicine man would be required to vacate and take their places outside among the many relatives and friends who had come to participate in the solemn ceremonies of effecting a restoration to health of one of their number. When the house would be cleared of all the inmates except the medicine man and his sick patient, a guard consisting of two Indian men would be placed near the two poles, whose duty it became to see that no living thing, whether it be a dog or chicken, cat or mouse, man or beast, would be permitted to pass between the poles and the door, until the three-day ceremonial period was completed. This guard would be relieved by other members of the congregated group at intervals of three or four hours. In this manner a constant watch was kept of the entrance to the house or lodge. It was believed that a failure to carry out explicitly all parts of the ceremony would invoke the displeasure of the good spirit to whom the medicine man

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looked for assistance in ridding the body of a patient of the evil spirit which had entered his body and was the cause of his sickness and that the person responsible for any failure to conform with the prescribed regulations would bring the wrath of the good spirit, not only upon his own head but also upon the head of the person who it was sought to cure. From this watchfulness and the dire results of a laxity, it may be inferred that the guard did well his duty.

The house having been cleared of all except the patient and the medicine man, the watchful guard placed in their proper places, and the solicitous friends comfortably settled nearby, the patient would be placed upon a suitable buffalo robe and stripped to the waist. The medicine man having already provided himself with a drum, the head of which was made of deer-skin, would squat near his patient and begin his incantation to the accompaniment of the soft drum beats. In the meantime, from the juice of certain herbs which he had placed in his mouth, he would <sup>upon</sup> squirt or spray from his mouth/the exposed parts of the patient's body. This ceremony would be continued into the

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third day if the patient survived the treatment. If the patient showed improvement after the first two days, preparations for a feast and dance to be held in the evening of the third day would be made. This preparation consisted of cooking great pots of "pashofa", beaten corn to which has been added quantities of fresh meat and all boiled together. When ready to serve, bowls would be filled and placed on the ground between logs, which served as seats, placed at the proper distance from the bowls to enable the participants to eat from each side of the bowls. In this manner one dish served the needs of two persons. As the bowls would be emptied, those who had eaten would vacate their log seats and their places would be taken by others who had not been served. It was one of the inexorable rules that each person present, from the youngest to the oldest, must partake of the feast as this particular part of the ceremony was intended to show that the evil spirit which had entered the body of the patient had been vanquished and that the participants were now eating its remains. Thence to fail, for any reason, to assist in the full destruction of the evil spirit would be an act

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of disloyalty toward an esteemed member of the tribe and at the same time, in the event of the subsequent death of the patient, place the person who has so failed to participate in the feast, in the position of being in league with the evil spirit.

After all the congregated friends and relatives of patient had partaken of the feast, a leader of the dance would be designated and he would be assisted by a squaw. The leader would array himself in the proper regalia while the squaw would fasten about her legs a number of terrapin shells so tied together as to permit one striking the other when shaken, thus providing a form of rattle to accompany the incantations and beating of the drum when the dance was begun. The assembled Indians, sometimes from fifty to sixty in number, would form a circle, the extent of which would be governed by the number of participants, usually about one yard apart. The medicine man would then emerge from the house with his drum, be seated at a point near the center of the circle, and would then begin the beating of the tom-tom, the while repeating the wierd songs which he knew would bring from the encircling group

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the responsive movements which, however barbaric, were rhythmic and graceful.

These dances would continue, in many instances, throughout the night and, no doubt, in many cases, through their psychological effect on the patient, assisted in restoring him to strength and health.

In the event the patient did not respond to the primitive treatment provided by the medicine man and was seized by the grim monster, while under his treatment, the wise old savant would always provide a plausible excuse for his failure to effect the destruction of the evil spirit which was the seat of the ailment. To admit the defeat of his purpose without at the same time assigning the blame to an agency other than his own, would mean his utter discredit as a medicine man and, in many instances, his death on a charge of being in league with evil spirits. So, as before stated, some one other than the medicine man was made to bear the brunt of his failure to effect a cure.

The primitive Indians were given to the practice of ceremonial rites which to us of a later day are regarded

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as barbarity, but when we consider that it has been but a comparatively short time since the white man with all his learning attributed many of our evils to witchcraft, we should, as with a mantle of charity, shield the untutored Indian from unjust criticism for his invocation of the aid of non-existent forces in combatting maladies for which he knew no other cure. What could be more expressive of trust and friendship than the smoking of the pipe of peace by all participants in an inter-tribal council, as was this ceremony? What could better symbolize an unanimity of purpose and a mind divested of all sinister motives than the acceptance of the pipe of peace in council, and by the exhalation of two or three puffs of smoke by each, one indicated that with them went all semblance of hatred and malice which possibly had been engendered as the result of previous battles.